THE WILD PARTY

A Dramaturgical Casebook

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PLAYHOUSE ON PARK

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Joseph Moncure March Writes the Poem of the Century

By Jeff Grimshaw

In the spring of 1926, following what he called "...a series of brutal altercations with Harold Ross," Joseph Moncure March quit his job as the (very first!) managing editor of The New Yorker. He moved into a depressing 4th floor walkup on 14th Street in Greenwich Village. He was all but broke. His father staked him enough money to get through the summer, which he (of course!) spent writing a book-length piece of narrative verse—rhyming!—about "a lot of people getting drunk at a party."

He had the first two lines, which had popped into his head, apropos of nothing, a few months earlier:

'Queenie was a blonde, and her age stood still,
And she danced twice a day in vaudeville.'

He never wrote an outline. If his 1968 memoir “A Certain Wildness” is to be believed, he improvised the whole thing: “On good days, I would be able to do as much as ten lines; on bad days, I would be lucky to get four.” Three months along, he wrote

‘The door sprang open
And the cops rushed in.’

That seemed like a good place to stop, so he stopped.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about The Wild Party is that it is actually about a wild party. It is not a metaphor for Late Stage Capitalism. It has no Homeric parallels. March plays no modernist or post-modernist games. There is barely any plot, though plenty happens and it concludes with a killing. It’s a 110 page drunken orgy, and it rhymes.

March had no doubts about its quality. He gave it to his friend Richard Simon, whose new publishing firm Simon & Schuster then specialized in crossword puzzle books. Simon liked it, but thought “The Wild Party” was a little too wild for 1926. He suggested they ‘dilute’ the sex, a curious word, by appending some of March’s lyrics to the manuscript, and he sent the whole shebang to the famous anthologist Louis Untermeyer, who loved it.

Simon then sent it to John Sumner, the head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, who very much did not love it. Sumner told Simon if he published it Sumner would have him thrown in jail.

This was not an idle threat. In 1927 Sumner shut down Mae West’s Broadway play Sex and Mae spent 10 days in the can.

Eventually the manuscript came to the attention of Chicago publisher Pascal Covici, who brought out a limited edition of 750 copies in the summer of 1928, with illustrations by Reginald Marsh. It was as big a hit as you can be with a limited edition of 750 copies; it got, for instance a rave review from Conrad Aiken, who was a year or so away from a Pulitzer Prize for his Selected Poems. It received a tribute (in verse) from Franklin P. Adams in his then-famous column “The Conning Tower.” (Untermeyer gave it another rave in his Modern American Poetry: A Critical Anthology (1930), where he reprinted 4 of the 15 short poems March had added to his book).

“When Covici asked me what I was going to do next,” March says, “I made up my mind to write something that had no sex in it at all.” Inspired by a James Chapin painting of a black prize fighter resting between rounds, March spent three months writing The Set-Up.

He rented another crap apartment on 14th Street. Incredibly, he decided to write his story in rhyming verse again. Even more incredibly, he once again worked without an outline or even a clear idea of where he was going. He improvised the whole thing.

Well, it worked last time, right? There's no sex in it. And—this is my third 'incredibly' in the space of 50 words, but no other word will do here—his sex-free book length poem about the fight racket made the NY Times best seller list.

In a better world, March would have turned out borderline obscene book-length poems at more or less 18 month intervals for the next 50 years, but alas.

He was whisked away to Hollywood and MGM, likely the first (and last) author to get a job writing movies on the strength of his poems.

This sounds crazy until you read the poems.

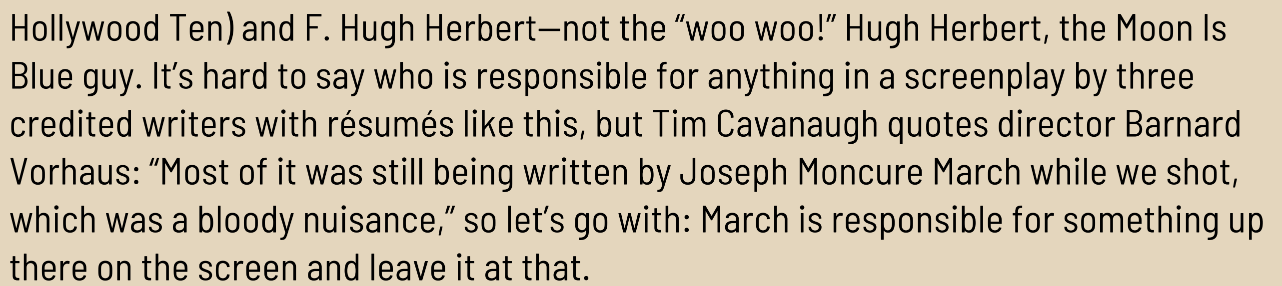
His first gig (as far as I can tell): Howard Hughes' Hell's Angels (1930). When production began, this was a silent film, but Hughes spent so long dicking around with the spectacular aerial dog fight scenes that sound came in and it had to be converted to a talking picture, necessitating the replacement of the heavily-accented leading lady, Greta Nissen, with a teenage Jean Harlow.

James Whale, coming off the Broadway hit Journey's End, was hired to direct the dialogue scenes while Hughes continued tweaking and re-shooting the aerial scenes. Whale didn't like the dialogue so he requested March for the rewrite and MGM lent him out. I haven't been able to discover what connection, if any, Whale and March had in New York. Maybe JW just dug "The Wild Party"? This is the movie that introduced the immortal line "Would you be shocked if I put on something more comfortable?" which made Jean Harlow an instant star, and with its many variations, might be March's most lasting contribution to the popular culture.

The dialogue scenes wrapped, but Hughes kept tinkering, and while he did Whale shot the film version of Journey's End, with a screenplay by March. It was released before Hell's Angels.

March worked on an awful lot of movies over the next 10 years, starting out at MGM and then Paramount, eventually moving down Republic. He called it a day after Lone Star Raiders (1940), a Three Mesquiteers programmer.

Many of his credited films are difficult or impossible to see. You Tube has a couple of different prints his 1932 adaptation of Madame Butterfly starring Cary Grant in his early wax manikin mode and Sylvia Sydney in yellow face. No arias, but lots of Puccini underscoring; I bailed quickly. I made it all the way through Three Faces West (1940), a John Wayne movie which Wikipedia promisingly describes as 'a knockoff of The Grapes of Wrath that ends with a faceoff between Okies and Nazis.' Well. The Okies are from North Dakota (and they're Oregon-bound); the faceoff consists of the (Austrian) heroine going to a San Francisco hotel to rejoin her (Austrian) fiancé, finding out he's a Nazi now, and saying no thanks. Not exactly the slug fest between Big John and The Red Skull I had been anticipating. This one is on YouTube as well, in a decent print. March's (credited) co-writers were Samuel Ornitz (one of the



Hollywood Ten) and F. Hugh Herbert—not the "woo woo!" Hugh Herbert, the Moon Is Blue guy. It's hard to say who is responsible for anything in a screenplay by three credited writers with résumés like this, but Tim Cavanaugh quotes director Barnard Vorhaus: "Most of it was still being written by Joseph Moncure March while we shot, which was a bloody nuisance," so let's go with: March is responsible for something up there on the screen and leave it at that.

Post-Hollywood, there was war work in a steel mill, movies for the war department and the state department, short stories for Cosmopolitan, Hollywood exposés in The Times magazine. Finally he moved into advertising, producing and writing dozens of films for MPO Productions. The two that everybody still talks about are Design for Dreaming (1956) & A Touch of Magic (1961) for General Motors. They are easily found all over the Internet in gorgeous super saturated color transfers, and they are amazing. Clips pop up (used ironically, I'm sorry to say) in music videos by Peter Gabriel and Rush, Nintendo commercials, David Fincher's The Game, and assorted horror movies. (They are in the public domain) (Also, they rhyme. "Girls don't go to Motoramas / Dressed in a pair of pink pajamas" is at least as good as L L Cool J rhyming "Ayatollah" with "granola." March may not have been thrilled about doing this stuff, and in fairness to the people who make fun of these movies they are absolutely nuts, but he got the job done.)

In 1968, now retired, he brought out a new edition of his two most famous poems, prefaced by a 20,000 word memoir, "A Certain Wildness." This is the primary source for virtually every essay and article on March and his poems (including this one). There's a little too much family background for my taste, but it's pretty wonderful. March attended Robert Frost's undergraduate poetry seminars at Amherst:

'One evening he decided to be irreverent about Amy Lowell. He passed out paper and pencils, and made us all write two "free verse" poems in the Lowell manner. Then he collected the poems and read them aloud. Some were amusing parodies and some might have been written by Amy Lowell herself.

"You see how it is?" said Frost gently. "Anybody can write poetry like that."

After that evening, I made up my mind never to write a poem in free verse again.'

(This decision was crucial to the success of The Wild Party. As its many adaptors have discovered, once you lose March's (occasionally) goofy rhymes and syncopated rhythms, it's barely a party at all).

March also says that whenever Frost spotted March strolling around the campus, he would ask "You got any poems you want me to look at?" I have to think Frost had an extremely dry sense of humor.

"A Certain Wildness" makes this edition essential, since it appears nowhere else.

Unfortunately, March revised both of his poems for it, and this was, to be as polite as possible, not a good idea. In the case of The Set-Up, he changed the protagonist's crooked managers, originally Jewish, to "Stone and MacPhail," and the dialog, previously thick with ethnic slang, is now colorless aside from "dese" and "dose" and the like.

There are a couple of ethnic references snipped out or altered in The Wild Party (passages where he used "Jew" as an adjective, and rhymed it), but what's mostly gone, are, amazingly, the hot parts. Not all the hot parts, but in the first section, we lose:

'She covered his mouth with a kiss like a flame
And he quivered; and he gasped;
And he almost came.' [Part One, section 3]

...at which point 'She' (Queenie) whacks him (Burrs) in the face. Then things get uglier. You can still follow the action with that passage gone, but my goodness.
And then there are 37 consecutive lines clipped from Part Two, all about another 'him' (Black) working his hand under Queenie's gown, and then her brassiere, to excellent effect.
You can see why these passages would have made John Sumner's head blow up in 1926, but in 1968?? This edition comes with a whole bunch of (mostly) perfunctory drawings by Paul A. Busch. And one of these illustrates the missing, boob-related passage! Were the drawings done for an earlier edition? Were the CUTS made for an earlier edition? I am flummoxed.

But what about the poem itself? I find myself asking what everybody who has ever written about it has asked, beginning with Louis Untermeyer in 1926: Is it any good? Is it even a poem? And like everybody else, I answer the first question with a resounding: I'm not sure.

As to the second question, I defer to Wm. S Burroughs, who said, "Of course it's a poem. It rhymes."

Whatever it is, it's not dead.

The Wild Party is divided in two parts: a brief prelude to the party, introducing Queenie, the Vaudeville dancer, and her current live-in paramour, Burrs, a "clown /Of some renown" on the same bill. The geography of the apartment is laid out for us. Queenies and Burrs are quickly established (while they are lazing about on a lazy Sunday morning) as volatile, promiscuous, jealous, and prone to violence. Following a brief, nasty spat (it includes Queenie brandishing a knife and a glass bottle, and maybe a tiny bit of hate-sex), they decide to throw a party. The descriptions of the apartment, here and elsewhere, are as vivid as the character work, and do not slow things down in the slightest. In face they grease it along in some weird way.

Part Two, much longer and subdivided into 10 sections, is the party itself. 1: We are rapidly introduced to the guests: the predatory lesbian Madeline True; the bisexual tap dancer Jackie; the brutal ex-pug Eddie and his girlfriend, Mae; Mae's underage sister, Nadine; Dolores, the faux Spanish aristocrat, and the d'Armano Brothers, Oscar & Phil, incestuous gay siblings and songwriting partners.

In section 2, Queenie's BFF Kate arrives with a new boy toy in tow, Mr. Black; Queenies likes his looks and decides to flirt with him to annoy Burrs—'The spurs / For Burrs!' 3: Madeline True moves in on a girl stoned on something (in Speigleman's drawing it looks like opiates are involved), Kate chats with Burrs, and Queenie dances with Black. Queenie expertly reels him in, and Burrs notices but affects not to care.

4: Oscar and Phil are seated at the piano ('They hammered on the keys / And shrieked falsetto melodies'). Jackie leans in and kisses Phil on the lips, infuriating Oscar. Here follow 50 lines of hair pulling and 'shrilling,' cheered on by the other guests, until Jackie pacifies them by suggesting they sing their 'nice new song.' (Conrad Aiken says this part, "in vaudeville language, is a scream.") We get the whole song, "My Sweetie Is Gone." The room loves it. So loudly do they love it that a neighbor across the alley is awakened and threatens to call the cops. Lots of yelling back and forth, leading to the only 1968 revision which is a clear improvement: "He wants t' sleep, th' dear sweet bastard!" / Sneered Eddie: "That guy oughta be plastered!" is swapped out for: "The son-of-a-bitch! He wants to sleep!" / "Jesus Christ! What a stupid creep!" (The plastered / bastard rhyme was used elsewhere anyway). Burrs warns Queenie to "lay off that guy!" Queenie dances with Black; Burrs watches. "He sneered / And joined Kate on the bed."

Let's talk about that bed for a minute. There are two beds in this apartment. One of them is in the bedroom, just like yours. The other one, described in in Part One, is in the studio:

Pink cushions,
Blue cushions: overlaid
With silk: with lace: with gold brocade.
These were propped up on a double bed
That was covered with a Far East tapestry spread.

This is located (Spiegelman provides a helpful diagram of the apartment) where you or I would put a sofa, or some chairs. So this is, basically, the orgy bed, and the other one is for sleeping (or privacy).

Section 5: Hotcha! We get to the orgy!

The candles flared: their flames sprang high:
The shadows leaned disheveled, awry:
And the party began to reek of sex.
White arms encircled swollen necks:
Blurred faces swam together: locked
Red hungry lips:
Closed eyes:
Rocked.

We get brief glimpses of people we've met before, entangled or disengaged, and then an unnamed couple 'saunters' out of the bedroom,

What had been going on in there?
Everyone knew
Who noticed the two
And nobody seemed to care

Black and Queenie sit nearby, sharing what he (foolishly) thinks is a tender moment. Burrs watches surreptitiously from the bed, working himself into a rage:

"Lie still, Burrsie!"
Kate's hand pressed
His hot head back against her breast

(I'm not certain, but I do get the impression that mostly what's happening on that crowded bed in the studio is heavy petting.)

Section 6 opens with the Brothers d'Armano passed out under the piano, joined shortly by Jackie. There's an attempted rape, a couple of fights, a rousing chorus of "Sweet Adeline," the guy across the alley (the very short section 7) calls the cops, Black and Queenie get hot and heavy and stroll past the unconscious Burrs into the bedroom (8). Section 9 is a total of 12 lines, 6 couplets, 4 beats to the line. "Some love is fire: some is rust / But the fiercest, cleanest love is lust…" etc. Some people like this part a lot. For instance, Ian Fleming, who quotes those two lines without attribution in Goldfinger. Anyway, it's a little lyrical interlude before the big finish (10), which I won't give away but I bet you can figure out.

As a poem, there are issues. Some are technical. The same rhymes pop up multiple times. Sometimes the rhythm is jarring and effective, sometimes it's just jarring. Some of it is flat, like uninspired prose with unjustified margins. Elsewhere it flirts with being out and out doggerel. At times it goes beyond flirting— it's on third base and sliding into home. There are places where the word choice is lazy to the point of distraction. Sometimes it's because a rhyme is needed, sometimes it's just inexplicable.

But paradoxically, these sloppy parts make it seem like the whole thing was

written in one sitting. And, it has velocity. When it's hitting on all cylinders, and it often is, it's impossible to stop reading. Long passages stay in your head for days. It reads more like a film treatment than any kind of narrative verse. You're never unsure of what's going on with the story. It would have been remarkable if Hollywood had NOT scooped up Joseph Moncure March.

Technical issues aside, there's something else amiss, but that's easy to articulate. The Wild Party doesn't need deeper characterization, subplots, better scansion, or any of that stuff.

What the poem requires is more fucking.

Other kinds of sex, too, naturally (especially the ones that are easy to rhyme), but mostly more fucking.

This thing desperately wants straight up pornography. In fact, it wants to BE straight up pornography. Somewhere, in the depths of his far-too innocent soul, I think Joseph Moncure March knew this, but he couldn't admit it to himself, let alone pull it off.

And if he had? It would have been insane. It was nearly unpublishable as it was. The syncopated gin-fueled fuck-fest, which you can sense trying to burst through this all over the place, could never have been printed by any legitimate publisher in 1928 and if it had been, it would have landed him in the slammer for sure.

It would have been great. But we should be thankful for what we have.

It's absolutely sui generis, and it is alive.

EPILOGUE-ISH

Both of March's long poems have had interesting afterlives. The Set-Up was made into a 1949 Robert Wise movie with Robert Ryan and Audrey Totter. The characters have been altered considerably (changing the protagonist from black to white enraged March) but the plot is largely intact: a boxer's low-life managers agree to have him take a dive, but they're so sure he's going to lose anyway they don't bother to tell him, and thus get to keep his part of the payoff. The fight itself follows the poem almost line for line, and it's very convincing, partly because Ryan moves like a real boxer (he was the heavyweight boxing champion at Dartmouth 4 years running), and partly because Wise, unusually for the period, used multiple cameras, including a handheld one. The whole film takes place in real time, like High Noon avant la lettre. There's a quasi-happy ending, unlike the poem, which concludes with the protagonist cornered by hoods in a subway station and falling under the wheels of a train. March was still bitching about the changes 20 years later, and you can see his point, but it's a terrific film.

The Wild Party was turned into a James Ivory / Ismael Merchant film in 1975 (for Samuel Arkoff's AIP!), and by all accounts it is a Stench In The Nostrils of God. It was originally intended as a musical. This idea was abandoned early on, but every other pre-production decision seems perverse, beginning with the idea of moving the story from New York to Hollywood and incorporating elements of the Fatty Arbuckle scandal into it. Everybody involved in this debacle blames everybody else. Raquel Welch, fresh from her 1973 Anno Mirabilis (The Last of Sheila & The Three Musketeers, the latter of which brought her a Golden Globe), is Queenie, definitely not a blonde. The story is so far from the March's poem you might wonder why they bothered purchasing the rights. Ah! Because one of the characters is called James Montgomery Morrison (played by David Duke), occupation: poet!

I confess I have not seen this thing (the clips on YouTube are unpromising), but the Internet Archive does have a digitalized copy of the novelization, which is instructive. It opens with the poet, who has been shot in the throat by the Arbuckle character (James Coco) (he was trying to shoot some other people) (and eventually did), in the hospital where the police are trying to get a statement. He can't talk, of course, but he's a poet, so he writes them a book length poem.

"Morrison, weaker than he realized, settled the pad in his lap and started to write:

Queenie was a blonde
And her age stood still.
She used to dance in vaudeville..."

So they didn't even leave the first two lines intact. 154 pages later, we arrive at:

"Nadine watched
In wonder,
Amazement—
Not in horror.
Can this be true? Her face asked.
Is this what you get in the end
After hitchhiking and hoping and believing
In something?

On the top of the first page Morrison wrote "The Wild Party" and placed the clipboard and the yellow legal-size pad on his bedside table. Then he went to sleep." Mr. Morrison's poem does not take up the whole book. He does a lot of his remembering in prose. Since the screenplay and March's book don't track, sometimes we get chunks of the (real) poem, lightly altered to match the events of the film, and sometimes, he's just gotta freestyle:

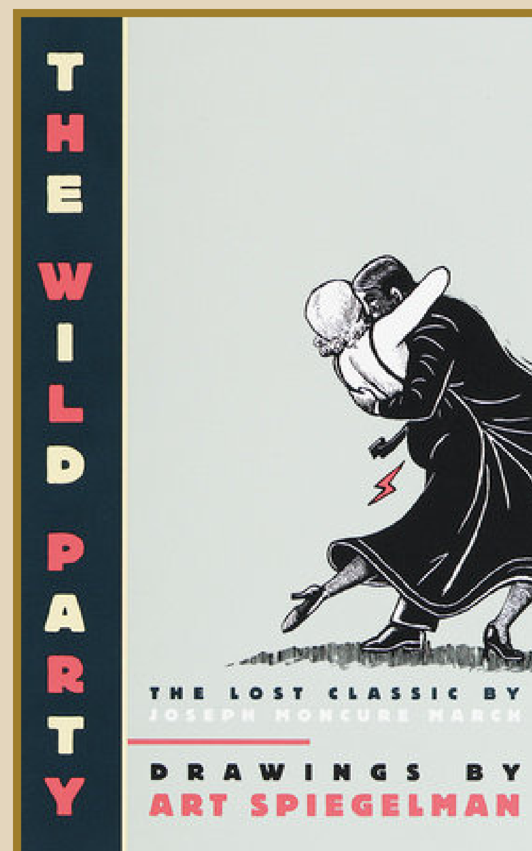
'He sat brooding like an overweight satyr
Over a cup and a percolator'

That's fun, but I guess by page 154 the novelizer was pooped, or misplaced his rhyming dictionary.

Art Spiegleman brought out an edition of the poem (the original text, not the 1968 revision) in 1994, copiously illustrated, with a good introduction (it's where the William Burroughs quote, "Of course it's a poem. It rhymes," comes from). Spiegleman's Party is an expressionist inferno and it is a lovely piece of work, still in print and easily available.

This edition was the catalyst for not one but two musical adaptations in 2000, which briefly played literally minutes from each other, one on Broadway, and one Off-Broadway. (I keep reading that one of them is in a 'twenties idiom' and the other one is in a 'deliberately anachronistic modern idiom,' and I'm sure it's true, but I've listened to a bunch of songs from each and I don't have any idea which is which. For a good time, I suggest comparing the opening numbers of each, both of them settings of the "Queenie was a blonde" stanza).

The triple XXX version (NC-17 won't do!) still waits to be made.



Art Spiegelman's illustrations for
The Wild Party

A 'Wild' Coincidence Revisited

by By Christopher Caggiano for American Theatre

"Wow. This would make a great musical."

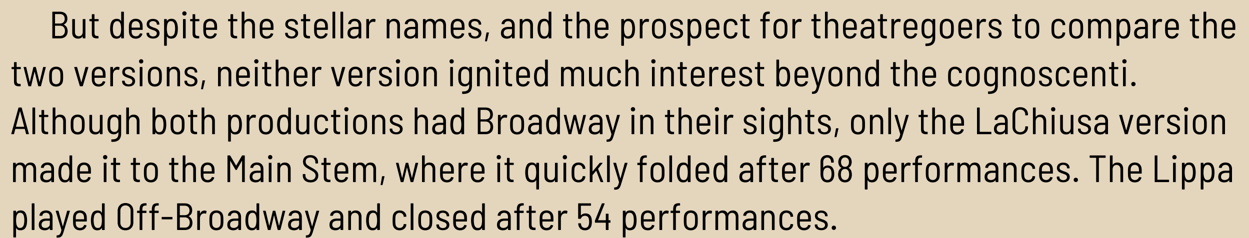
That's what two separate up-and-coming musical-theatre writers said, around the same time, when each came across the same extended narrative poem, Joseph Moncure March's The Wild Party (1928). The long out-of-print work had received renewed attention when it received a 1994 reissue, with illustrations by Pulitzer Prize-winning illustrator Art Spiegelman (Maus). After becoming captivated by the theatrical possibilities of the poem, both Andrew Lippa and Michael John LaChiusa set about turning the work into a stage musical.

Of course, Lippa and LaChiusa didn't know at first that someone else had the same idea. Since the poem was in the public domain, there was no necessity to negotiate with the author's estate, and thus no immediate way to know about each other and their respective efforts. Indeed, wasn't until both shows were announced for the 1999–2000 theatre season that people became aware of this uncanny artistic coincidence.

Lippa's version of The Wild Party is currently being presented as part of the Encores! Off-Center series, which this season also featured productions of William Finn's A New Brain and Menken and Ashman's Little Shop of Horrors. The Encores! production of The Wild Party features Broadway stars Sutton Foster, Steven Pasquale, and Brandon Victor Dixon, and plays through Sunday, July 19th.

When Lippa's and LaChiusa's respective versions first appeared, there was much discussion among theatre insiders as to not only how two composers could have the same idea, but how two prominent and respected institutions—the Public Theater and the Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC)—could have scheduled competing versions from the same source. But the confusion didn't stop people from seeing both versions and championing the version they liked better, both in person and in online theatre forums.

Aside from the significantly divergent takes that Lippa and LaChiusa had on the piece, both productions also featured some pretty high-profile names in their cast. The MTC version had Taye Diggs, Idina Menzel, Julia Murney, and Brian d'Arcy James. (It also featured Steven Pasquale in the ensemble, and covering the part of Burrs, the role he is currently playing in the Encores! staging.) The Public Theatre production boasted Toni Collette, Mandy Patinkin, and Eartha Kitt.



But despite the stellar names, and the prospect for theatregoers to compare the two versions, neither version ignited much interest beyond the cognoscenti. Although both productions had Broadway in their sights, only the LaChiusa version made it to the Main Stem, where it quickly folded after 68 performances. The Lippa played Off-Broadway and closed after 54 performances.

Both shows live on through their respective cast recordings, as well as numerous regional and collegiate productions, and together they offer a fascinating case study in the artistic choices that creators make when adapting a work for the musical stage. Lippa and LaChiusa take significantly different approaches to setting the story to music, approaches that embody a fascinating dynamic in musical theatre that continues to this day: the tension between the traditional and the experimental, art and commerce, honoring the past and creating the future.

The 1928 poem was extremely racy for its time, and was accordingly “banned in Boston.” But the piece was also a compelling refection of the louche, gin-soaked Jazz Age milieu of the 1920s. The story centers around a “sexually ambitious” vaudeville performer named Queenie, her abusive lover Burrs, and Black, a handsome stranger who comes to their titular party. Much drinking, carousing, soul-searching, and chest-thumping ensues. Poet March, a former managing editor at the New Yorker, spent two years trying the get the poem published, as the subject matter was too risqué for most publishers.

Interestingly, although the source material was already in verse form, both LaChiusa and Lippa eschewed the impulse to simply musicalize the text as is. But both versions feature the evocative first words of the poem:

“Queenie was a blonde and her age stood still
And she danced twice a day in vaudeville”

From there on, the shows return to the actual text of the poem only occasionally, with Lippa borrowing textual snippets a bit more liberally than LaChiusa.

Both versions adhere to the poem’s focus on character and atmosphere, at the expense of specific events or action. Lippa focuses in on the interactions among the central characters, whereas LaChiusa creates more of an ensemble work, giving more voice to the colorful array of minor characters, including the pugilist Eddie, the predatory Madelaine, and the pansexual Jackie. LaChiusa gives the characters a bit more flesh, most notably in his haunting duet for Queenie and Black, “People Like Us.” The shows also differ greatly in their musical styles. LaChiusa’s score is more firmly set in the 1920s, presenting a pastiche of the music of the day. Lippa’s score has more a mixture of styles, modern and historical. (Witness the oft-maligned electric guitar replete in the show’s orchestrations.) Lippa as composer seems more

concerned with creating standalone set pieces with his songs, while LaChiusa veers more toward overall musical cohesion and dramatic integration. Lippa's melodies are more accessible, more melodic, but also more pedestrian. By contrast, LaChuisa's music is challenging, uncompromising. Lippa's score is far easier on the ears, but LaChiusa's is more dramatically satisfying.

Both shows, and authors, have their detractors. Lippa relies a bit too much on slant rhyme (pairing "vicious" with "wishes") and faulty scansion ("lesbian love story" becomes "lesbian LOVE sto-RY") for some people's taste. And some of his lyrics seems like placeholders, as if they exist only to take up space or make things rhyme. As for LaChiusa, there are those who say that he'll only ever become a truly great artist if he finds his heart. His work often feels too clever by half, focusing more on the concept than the people, a bit like a master's thesis set to music.

Both gentlemen are still actively working in musical theatre: LaChiusa is currently working on First Daughter Suite, a companion piece to his First Lady Suite (1993), and an adaptation of the Somerset Maugham novel Rain. Lippa just finished his acclaimed I Am Harvey Milk, about the celebrated gay-rights activist, and wrote the music and lyrics for the recent Broadway musicals Big Fish and The Addams Family.

Will the current Encores! production fuel renewed interest in either version of the show? Might the Lippa version finally make its way to Broadway, buoyed by the presence of Sutton Foster, as occurred two seasons ago with the musical Violet? Lippa is reportedly making changes to the piece for the new production, based on the years of distance and having witnessed numerous other mountings of the show. Has the age of these uniquely convergent adaptations, like Queenie, "stood still"—or is it perhaps time to move on to the next party?

LaChiusa Version
Toni Collette and Mandy Patinkin in "The Wild Party" on Broadway (Photo: Carol Rosegg/NYPL)

Lippa Version
Brian d'Arcy James and Julia Murney in The Wild Party. (Joan Marcus)

Selections from The Roaring Twenties

by Joshua Zeitz for the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

The 1920s heralded a dramatic break between America's past and future. Before World War I the country remained culturally and psychologically rooted in the nineteenth century, but in the 1920s America seemed to break its wistful attachments to the recent past and usher in a more modern era. The most vivid impressions of that era are flappers and dance halls, movie palaces and radio empires, and Prohibition and speakeasies. Scientists shattered the boundaries of space and time, aviators made men fly, and women went to work. The country was confident—and rich. But the 1920s were an age of extreme contradiction. The unmatched prosperity and cultural advancement was accompanied by intense social unrest and reaction. The same decade that bore witness to urbanism and modernism also introduced the Ku Klux Klan, Prohibition, nativism, and religious fundamentalism. America stood at a crossroads between innovation and tradition. Many Americans were looking boldly ahead, but just as many were gazing backward, to cherished memories of a fabled national innocence.

Age of Convergence

Many of the trends that converged to make the twenties distinct had been building for years, and in some cases, decades.

We think of the twenties as an era of liberation for women. Indeed, the decade gave rise to the flapper, described by Webster's Collegiate Dictionary as "a young girl, esp. one somewhat daring in conduct, speech and dress," immortalized in the short stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald and by silent film stars like Clara Bow, Colleen Moore, and Louise Brooks. But women had been breaking down the separate spheres of Victorian culture for quite some time. A powerful women's political movement demanded and won the right to vote in 1920. Spurred on by the growth of an urban, industrial economy that required a larger female labor force, and by the emergence of public amusements that defied the old nineteenth-century courting system, many young women now had the wherewithal and drive to lead independent lives. By the dawn of the decade, anywhere between one-quarter and one-third of urban woman workers lived alone in private apartments or boardinghouses, free from the watchful eyes of their parents, and as early as 1896, newspaper columnist George Ade used the term "date" to describe a new convention by which boys and girls paired off to frolic at dance halls, amusement parks, and other public spaces, free from adult supervision.

Closely associated with the rise of the flapper, the twenties gave rise to a frank, national discussion about sex. But this trend, too, had been building over time. As early as 1913, the Atlantic Monthly announced that the clock had tolled "Sex o'clock in America," indicating a "Repeal of Reticence" about issues that had once been considered taboo. To be sure, these trends accelerated after World War I: surveys suggest that 14 percent of women born before 1900 engaged in pre-marital sex by the age of 25, while as many as 39 percent of women who came of age in the 1910s and 1920s lost their virginity before marriage. But the fundamental structural changes that were at play in earlier decades—namely, urbanization and industrialization—long predated the twenties. Between 1800 and 1920 the number of children borne by the average American woman fell from seven to three. Americans were not necessarily having less sex. Rather, in an urbanizing society, where more children were a cost rather than an asset, they stepped up their use of birth control, and in so doing, redefined sex as something to engage in for pleasure rather than procreation.

We think of the twenties as an era of prosperity, and in many respects, Americans had never lived so well. But this trend, too, claimed earlier roots. As factories and shops mechanized, the work week of the urban blue-collar worker fell from 55.9 hours in 1900 to 44.2 in 1929, while his or her real wages rose by 25 percent. By the dawn of the twenties, Americans had more time and money to spend on new kinds of public amusements like dance halls, movie theaters, fun parks, and baseball stadiums. They also had more opportunities to buy competitively priced durable items, thanks to new methods of production and distribution. The prosperity of the post-war period greatly accelerated this trend. By 1929, American families spent over 20 percent of their household earnings on such items as phonographs, factory-made furniture, radios, electric appliances, automobiles, and "entertainment." What people couldn't afford, they borrowed. By the mid-'20s Americans bought over three-quarters of all furniture, phonographs, and washing machines on credit.

Flappers, like the one shown here, ditched the stuffy clothing of the Victorian era for more daring, free-flowing fashion. Image: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ds-13023

The proliferation of advertising—alongside the maturation of the publishing, music, and film industries—exposed citizens to a new gospel of fun that was intimately associated with the purchase of goods and services. "Sell them their dreams," a prominent ad-man intoned. "Sell them what they longed for and hoped for and almost despaired of having. Sell them hats by splashing sunlight across them. Sell them dreams—dreams of country clubs and proms and visions of what might happen if only. After all, people don't buy things to have them. . . . They buy hope—hope of what your merchandise might do for them."

Age of Wonders

If many of the social trends that we associate with the twenties had long been building, the decade was indeed unique in many ways.

It was a decade of firsts. For the first time ever, more Americans (51 percent) lived in cities than in villages or on farms.

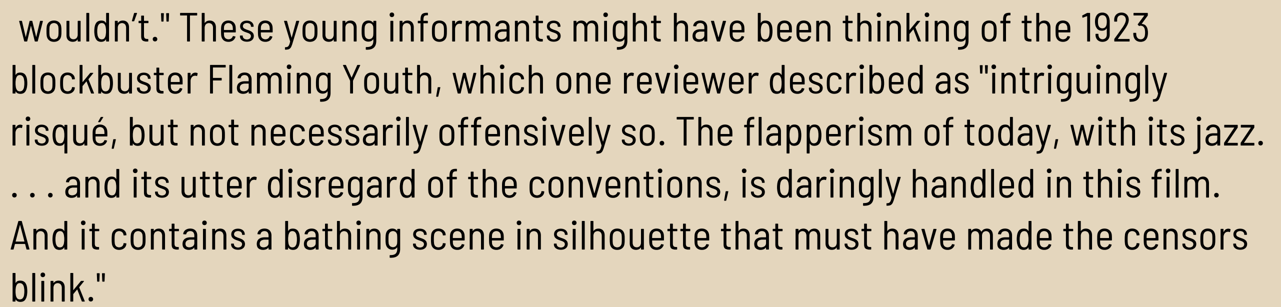
It was a decade of economic expansion. Between 1919 and 1929 horsepower per wage earner in manufacturing skyrocketed by 50 percent, signaling a robust wave of mechanization that increased productivity by 72 percent in manufacturing, 33 percent in railroads, and 41 percent in mining.

And it was a decade of technological wonder.

In 1912, only 16 percent of American households had electricity; by the mid-20s, almost two-thirds did. Overnight, the electric vacuum cleaner, the electric refrigerator and freezer, and the automatic washing machine became staples in middle-class homes.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, automobiles were still unreliable and scarce, but in the years just prior to World War I, pioneers like Ransom Olds, Henry Leland, and Henry Ford revolutionized design and production methods to make the car affordable and trustworthy. When the sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd interviewed high school students in Muncie, Indiana, in the mid-20s, they found that the most common sources of disagreement between teenagers and their parents were 1) "the number of times you go out on school nights during the week"; 2) "the hour you get in at night"; 3) "grades at school"; 4) "your spending money"; and 5) "use of the automobile."

Another pre-war technology that came of age in the twenties was film. By the mid-1920s movie theaters were selling 50 million tickets each week, a sum equal to roughly half the US population! And the generation that came of age in the twenties learned things at the movie palace that they couldn't learn in school. "The only benefit I ever got from the movies was in learning to love and the knowledge of sex," a young woman confided to an interviewer in the mid-20s. "If we didn't see such examples in the movies," explain another, "where would we get the idea of being 'hot?' We



wouldn't." These young informants might have been thinking of the 1923 blockbuster Flaming Youth, which one reviewer described as "intriguingly risqué, but not necessarily offensively so. The flapperism of today, with its jazz. . . . and its utter disregard of the conventions, is daringly handled in this film. And it contains a bathing scene in silhouette that must have made the censors blink."

Like film, radio was invented in the late nineteenth century but experienced its formative era of commercial expansion in the twenties. On November 2, 1920, radio station KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, broadcast the presidential election returns.

It was the first-ever live radio transmission for a popular audience, and although few Americans that evening had the necessary technology to hear the results, by 1922 more than three million households had acquired radio sets. Seven years later more than twelve million households owned radios, fuelling an industry that saw $852 million in annual sales.

Americans living in the 1920s could listen to Roxy and His Gang, the Clicqot Club Eskimos, and the Ipana Troubadours. They could hear Gartland Rice announce the World Series—live—or listen to Floyd Gibbons relate the day's news. Radio proved a highly democratic medium, and by mid-decade local stations helped bring "race music," "hillbilly" sounds, and ethnic recordings into living rooms across the country. In the late 1920s enterprising American businessmen built powerful "X-stations" just across the border in northern Mexico to evade federal radio frequency regulations. From this vantage point they were able to beam the music of "Fiddlin' John Carson," the Carter Family, and Jimmie Rodgers to every destination from California to New York City.

Return to Normalcy

Since the dawn of the twentieth century, American politics had been dominated by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, two presidents whose outsized personalities and dueling visions of the progressive spirit defined the tenor and tone of public life. After 1920, Americans seemed to aspire to "normalcy." In Warren G. Harding, they got exactly what they bargained (and voted) for.

Harding's best qualities were his extreme affability and striking good looks. Both got him in trouble regularly. Even as a young boy, the future president seemed all too inclined to please everyone and offend no one. As a successful newspaper publisher, local politician and, later, US senator from Ohio, Harding joined the Rotary Club, the Elks, the Odd Fellows, the Hoo Hoos, the Red Men, and the Moose. He relished poker

games and excelled at public speaking. He played the b-flat trumpet in the town marching band. Indeed, Warren Harding was the very embodiment of Sinclair Lewis's Babbit—and proud to be so.

The ever-genial Harding stacked his Cabinet with cronies from Ohio. He let his attorney general sell pardons and pledges of government non-interference to the highest bidders. He looked the other way while his secretary of the interior accepted almost $400,000 in kickbacks in exchange for a long-term lease on oil-rich federal lands at Teapot Dome, Wyoming. All the while, he adhered to a limited and conservative vision of government, pressing for lower taxes and less regulation and issuing an implicit repudiation of Wilsonian reformism.

Despite—or perhaps even because of—his limitations, Warren Harding was widely admired by the American electorate. When he died halfway through his term, the public offered up a great outpouring of sorrow and sympathy. It was only in the following months that Warren Harding's countrymen learned of their late president's extramarital affairs and scandal-ridden administration. But by then, it hardly seemed to matter. Everything was back to normal.

Silent Cal

Harding's successor, Calvin Coolidge, may have been the most reticent man ever to occupy the White House. Austere, laconic, and conservative to a fault, "Silent Cal" perfectly embodied the laissez-faire ethic that governed American politics throughout the "Jazz Age." He slept eleven hours each day, vetoed far more bills than he proposed, and claimed that his only hobby was "holding public office." He had little to say. When a constituent bet that she could "get more than two words" out of him, the President replied simply: "You lose." Upon hearing that Coolidge had passed away in 1933, the famous wit Dorothy Parker asked: "How could they tell?"

Coolidge slashed the federal budget by almost half, eliminated the gift tax, sliced the estate tax by 50 percent, and lowered the maximum federal surtax from 60 percent to 20 percent. The president disavowed anything beyond minimal regulation of business and commerce. He denied a federal role in labor relations and repeatedly affirmed his absolute faith in market forces. What was "of real importance to wage-earners," he claimed, "was not how they might quarrel with their employers but how the business of the country might so be organized as to insure steady employment at a fair rate of pay."

In 1928 Coolidge announced unexpectedly and without fanfare that he did "not choose to run for president" again. His wife was as surprised as anyone. "Isn't that just like the man!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea."

Culture Wars

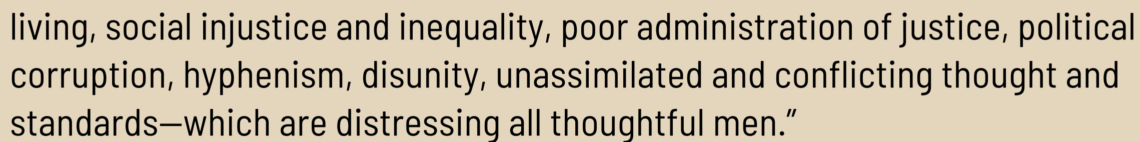
The great revolution in morals, aesthetics, and everyday life that was sweeping through America didn't meet with uniform approval. Though the twenties are remembered primarily as a decade of bold innovation and experimentation, they also witnessed a fierce counter-revolutionary tendency.

In 1925 a group of local boosters in Dayton, Tennessee, persuaded a young high school science teacher, John Scopes, to violate the state's anti-evolution law. They merely wanted to draw attention to their economically depressed crossroads town. Instead, what followed was a sensational trial that pitted the famous "lawyer for the damned" Clarence Darrow, a committed civil libertarian and almost fanatical atheist, against William Jennings Bryan, the famously eloquent Nebraskan who had thrice failed to attain the presidency but who remained a hero to rural fundamentalists in the South and Midwest. The trial's climax came when Darrow called his adversary to the stand as a biblical expert and Bryan reluctantly admitted that some scriptural language might be more allegorical than literal.

The trial seemed like the culmination of a long-simmering clash between liberal and fundamentalist Christians. Although it was technically a win for the prosecution, liberals declared it a great victory for their cause. Bryan, they said, had unintentionally exposed fundamentalism as a simpleton's creed, while Darrow had established the supremacy of science over fundamentalist Christianity. In fact, the conservatives were far from beat. They immediately began to regroup and charter missions, publishing houses, and radio stations. Fifty years later, they would reemerge as a powerful force in American public life.

More successful in the immediate term was the Ku Klux Klan, a Reconstruction-era paramilitary group that had faded from American life until 1915, when Colonel William Simmons re-founded the organization at a small ceremony on Stone Mountain, in Georgia. By 1925 the organization claimed at least five million members and controlled politics in Indiana, Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado; it was enormously powerful in several other states, notably California and Georgia. The Klan's greatest legislative achievement came in 1924, when it joined a broad coalition of conservative groups that won passage and approval of a draconian anti-immigration statute. The golden door would remain closed for another forty years.

The new Klan represented diverse ideas to its polyglot membership. It was avowedly white supremacist, but for good measure it also included Jews, Catholics, Asians, and "new women" among its list of enemies. Its followers could be found in cities as well as in the countryside, but as a general rule, the organization was fundamentalist and conservative in both profile and disposition. As one sympathetic observer explained, "The Ku Klux movement seems to be another expression of the general unrest and dissatisfaction with both local and national conditions—the high cost of



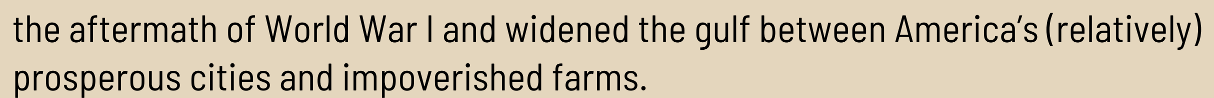
living, social injustice and inequality, poor administration of justice, political corruption, hyphenism, disunity, unassimilated and conflicting thought and standards—which are distressing all thoughtful men."

In 1924, the organization enjoyed sufficient strength to force a deadlock at the Democratic National Convention, where supporters of New York's governor, Al Smith —a Catholic—faced off against Klansmen aligned with former Treasury Secretary William McAdoo. While Smith's supporters shouted "Ku Klux McAdoo!"—to which McAdoo supporters taunted their opponents with cries of "Booze! Booze! Booze!"—the convention came to a deadlock. On the 103rd ballot, exasperated, and desperate, the convention agreed on a compromise candidate, a lackluster federal judge named John W. Davis, who was resoundingly defeated by the incumbent, Calvin Coolidge. It was the high-water mark for the Klan.

Arguably, Prohibition was the most successful achievement of anti-modern forces in the 1920s. Writing just after Congress and states ratified the Eighteenth Amendment, which authorized a ban on the production and sale of alcoholic beverages, the great urban wit H. L. Mencken attributed such "crazy enactments" to "the yokel's congenital and incurable hatred of the city man—his simian rage against everyone who, as he sees it, is having a better time than he is." In his shrill, visceral response to Prohibition, Mencken may have overstated the intensity of America's rural-urban divide. Over the next decade there would be no shortage of bathtub gin and woodshed stills in the countryside. Yet he was right on one count: passage of the Eighteenth Amendment and its accompanying federal statute, the Volstead Act, both of which took effect in 1920, were the culminating events in a long effort by conservative forces to check the growing power of America's immigrants and urban dwellers—one and the same, in some respects, since first- and second-generation Americans comprised the overwhelming (75+ percent) part of the population in metropolises like New York, Chicago, and Boston. Though Americans widely flouted the new law (and, accordingly, the twenties are remembered as a particularly liquid era), in fact, per capita alcohol consumption plummeted during Prohibition, lending the decade yet another paradoxical trait.

End of an Era

The twenties were always something of a gilded age. Even amid the great prosperity and excess of the decade, America's economy was fundamentally weak. Over 40 percent of Americans got by on less than $1,500 each year, which economists cited as the minimum family subsistence level. The income of the top 0.1 percent of families equaled the income of the bottom 42 percent. Most country folk did not experience the prosperity of the Roaring Twenties. Farm prices hit rock bottom in


the aftermath of World War I and widened the gulf between America’s (relatively) prosperous cities and impoverished farms.

Such glaring inequality had consequences. Boom times relied on mass consumption, and eventually, working people reached their limit. The very wealthy could only buy so many cars, washing machines, radio sets, and movie tickets. When consumer demand bottomed out, America’s economy simply stopped functioning. When the stock market collapsed in 1929, and when the twin influences of under-consumption and over-speculation began wreaking structural havoc on the American economy, the nation’s revolution in values and aesthetics remained incomplete. The twenties were arguably the nation’s first modern decade, but many of its social and cultural revolutions would play themselves out in future years.

Vulgarity & Vice: Times Square in the 1920s
by Jaap Harskamp

The 1920s was a decade of change and upheaval. While Europe was recovering from the First World War, the United States saw a period of economic growth and prosperity in which the country's focus shifted from rural areas to the cities. It was also a time of great creativity in art and entertainment. New York City set the pace.

The focus of excitement was the theater with an unprecedented public demand for plays and performances. The era saw a burst of theatrical construction with more than thirty new venues appearing in the city. These were Broadway's prime years. During the 1927/8 season, over 260 productions debuted there.

Times Square's accessibility began to flourish during the 1920s when all forms of public transportation stopped at 42nd Street. Compared to other major crosstown thoroughfares, the street was developed relatively late. The first theater opened its doors in 1899 and was followed by a range of other entertainment venues alongside the development of top-end office space around Grand Central Terminal.

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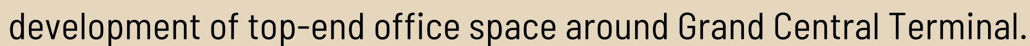


development of top-end office space around Grand Central Terminal.

With the building boom taking place, the call for advertising space around Times Square increased sharply. During the night the district became covered in a sea of light, producing a huge splash of color. The dazzling illuminations were a public attraction in their own right. Leisure became a booming business. Broadway offered its audiences a rich choice of plays, musical comedies, revues, operettas and other forms of fun and entertainment. A key player in these developments was a Jewish immigrant from Hungary.

The Woods Factor

Albert Herman Woods was born Aladore Herman in January 1870 in Budapest, but his family moved to the city of New York when he was a child. Growing up in the immigrant district of Manhattan's Lower East Side, he would roam the streets and skip school. Away from the gloomy tenements of his youth, he was lured by the gleaming lights of the theater.

Woods would become one of New York's most prolific theatrical producers, staging over 140 plays on Broadway including a number of blockbusters. Having been involved in managing tour companies of popular melodrama at the start of his career, he soon turned his attention to Time Square.

In August 1903 he opened his first show with Theodore Kremer's melodrama The Evil Men Do at the American Theatre in West 42nd Street (built in 1893; closed in 1930 and demolished two years later). Sensing that melodrama was losing its appeal, Woods was attracted towards an alternative genre that had previously taken Paris by storm.

Georges Feydeau was a wildly popular French playwright of the so-called "Belle Époque." He is remembered for plays that delighted audiences from the 1890s to the pre-World War I era. His farces were marked by closely observed characters with whom his (urban) audiences could identify.

The dramatist created a new type of comedy consisting of slamming doors, mistaken identity, hidden onlookers, ridiculous dialogue, sexual innuendo, adultery and improbable plots that, once it had reached London and New York City, became known as the "bedroom farce." Woods introduced the genre to Broadway.

Loved by the public at large, the emerging American passion for farce was closely scrutinized by anxious local authorities and angry morality crusaders. One of the attractions of the plays produced by Woods and his collaborators was pushing the boundaries of propriety and correctness beyond accepted norms. He encountered and almost encouraged legal intervention – it all added to publicity and promoted a scramble for tickets.

Let the Good Times Roll

Paul Meredith Potter, a playwright and journalist for the New York Herald, established a reputation for having turned George du Maurier's best-selling novel Trilby – set in bohemian Paris – into a stage play in 1895. Woods took note of his success.

Having read the original version of the play Loute (1902) by the prolific Parisian farceur Pierre Vebler, he was quick to purchase its production rights. Woods commissioned Potter to adapt the play, the plot of which portrays several couples in a tangle of adulterous affairs.

Prior to opening at Weber's Theatre on Broadway in February 1909, preview performances of The Girl from Rector's were scheduled in Trenton, New Jersey. The opening matinee left some of the audience in shock. A group of local clergymen issued an official complaint about the play's immoral contents upon which the police banned any further staging. The fall-out over the farce almost guaranteed its success. Once at Broadway, the show ran for 184 performances until July 1909.

Encouraged by public interest in the genre, Woods started preparation for the next salacious bedroom farce. In April 1910, he produced The Girl with the Whooping Cough, an adaptation by Stanislaus Stange of a French play. The story follows the misbehaviors of Regina as she passes whooping cough to numerous lovers. The leading role was played by Valeska Suratt, a young vaudeville actress who was billed as "The Biggest Drawing Card in New York."

The City's 94th Mayor William Jay Gaynor was not amused. He attacked the play as obscene and demanded its immediate closure because of sexually suggestive themes. The Police Commissioner threatened the management of the house that if the play was not taken off the repertoire, he would refuse to renew the theater's operating license.

Woods got an injunction from the New York Supreme Court that prevented the authorities from interfering with the show, but it did not compel them to renew his license. Left without a home for his show, Woods admitted defeat and was forced to shut it down. In response he built his own venue on 42nd Street. The Eltinge Theatre was named after one of his star performers.

Julian Eltinge (real name: William Julian Dalton) had started his acting career at a young age in Boston. Vaudeville authors at the time introduced cross dressing in their acts to create

exaggerated sexual stereotypes. In doing so, they broke the (theatrical) norms of the time.

Julian would become the most celebrated of female impersonators. Simply known as "Eltinge," his skillful performances turned him into a star. In 1906 he made his London debut at the Palace Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue to such acclaim that he was invited to give a performance at Windsor Castle in front of King Edward VII (who presented the actor with a white bulldog).

In 1911 Eltinge featured in The Fascinating Widow at the Liberty Theatre, West 42nd Street. A year to the day that the play was first staged, Woods opened his Eltinge Theatre. At the time of the occasion, Julian was America's highest paid actor and he went on to appear in a string of musical comedies on Broadway (including The Crinoline Girl and Cousin Lucy) written to showcase his skills, although he never performed in the playhouse that carried his name.

The Demi-Virgin

The theatrical empire Woods built was at its peak in the 1920s, producing a series of hit plays that drew large audiences to Time Square.

Eltinge Theatre

A. H. WOODS THEATRE CO. .... Owner
A. H. WOODS .... Manager

FIRE NOTICE

Look around NOW and choose the nearest Exit to your seat. In case of fire walk (not run) to THAT Exit. Do not try to beat your neighbor to the street.

THOMAS J. DRENNAN, Fire Commissioner.

WEEK BEGINNING MONDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 12, 1921

Matinees Wednesday and Saturday

A. H. WOODS Presents

THE DEMI-VIRGIN

A Farcical Romance

BY AVERY HOPWOOD

Author of "The Gold Diggers"

Staged by Bertram Harrison and Charles Mather

Characters

(In order of their appearance)

A MOVIE DIRECTOR .... CHARLES MATHER
OWEN BLAIR .... JOHN MARONI
JACK MILFORD .... RALPH GLOVER
REX MARTIN .... JOHN FLOYD
ESTELLE ST. MARR .... EDETH ROSE SCOTT

PROGRAM CONTINUED ON SECOND PAGE FOLLOWING

Egyptian Deities

Plain End or Cork Tip—25c

"The *Utmost* in Cigarettes"

Unvarying *Quality* Accounts for Their Unvarying *Prestige!*

Dramatist Avery Hopwood made his debut in 1906 when his play Clothes (1906) was produced on Broadway. Specializing in risqué comedies, he became known as "The Playboy Playwright." His 1921 three-act bedroom farce The Demi-Virgin was inspired by an earlier and popular theatrical adaptation of Marcel Prévost's 1894 novel Les Demi-Vierges. Woods brought Hopwood's play to Broadway.

Prior to its debut, several preview performances were staged outside New York City, beginning a one-week run in Pittsburgh in September 1921. The play was closed by the city's Director of Public Safety who objected to its "vulgar" dialogue. Woods gained valuable free publicity from coverage of the closure. The play eventually opened at Time Square Theatre on October 18, 1921, before

being transferred to the Eltinge Theatre three weeks later.

Contemporary reviews were negative. Critics condemned the play as immoral due to its sexual situations, revealing clothes and suggestive dialogue. The farce featured a strip poker scene (a game of cards called "Stripping Cupid"). The script also alluded to a sensational rape and murder case that was unraveling in court at the time and involved the silent movie star Roscoe Conkling "Fatty" Arbuckle.

On November 3, 1921, Woods and Hopwood were summoned to the chambers of William McAdoo, New York City's Chief Magistrate, who had received a number of complaints about the play. The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and the Committee of Fourteen (fighting prostitution in the city) were prominent voices amongst those who opposed the show.

As Woods flatly refused to address any of the objections, McAdoo ruled that the play was obscene, describing it as "coarsely indecent, flagrantly and suggestively immoral." The producer was accused of violating section 1140a of the New York State Penal Law which prohibited involvement in "any obscene, indecent, immoral or impure drama, play, exhibition, show or entertainment." Having gathered on December 23, 1921, the Grand Jury dismissed the case that same day. An attempt to revoke the theater's license also failed.

News coverage of legal actions provided ample publicity. It was reported that lengthy queues for tickets stretched outside the Eltinge Theatre after the case had opened in the magistrates' court. Once triumphant, the production team milked the controversy to boost ticket sales (so much so, that irritated editors of The New York Times barred Woods name from any notices placed in its pages).

After the Broadway production ended on June 3, 1922, it had been one of the most successful plays of the season, having sold over 200,000 tickets across 268 performances. Woods then launched four road companies to present the play in other cities. The tour continued through 1923 with productions in cities such as Albany, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Washington.

Bust

Woods lost most of his fortune in the early 1930s and never recovered from the blow. Julian Eltinge's career came to an end as a crackdown on homosexuality and cross-dressing prevented him from performing in costume.

The legal battle over The Demi-Virgin had reopened the discussion about strengthening the role of the censor. The call for new anti-obscenity legislation could be heard loud and clear. The economic slump of the 1930s encouraged

those who were concerned about loose or lost moral values to tighten their grip and preach (and enforce) a return to more rigid standards.

Broadway's building boom that took place in the 1920s was reversed during the Great Depression. Restaurants and theaters in Time Square were replaced by cheap eats and coarse entertainment venues. The turn-down was epitomized by the tumbling reputation of the Eltinge Theatre. It was degraded to an infamous burlesque house that, in the end, was shut down during a "public morality" campaign in 1943.

During the dark days of depression, the lights dimmed and the music died in the entertainment district. Theaters closed in rapid succession, some were demolished and others converted to cinemas. Residents who were accustomed to the "good times" of the 1920s were forced to move from the area and find more affordable properties. It would take some seven decades for Times Square to restore its reputation.

Illustrations, from above: The Girl with the Whooping Cough; colored postcard of Julian Eltinge, ca. 1907 (Wellcome Collection); sheet music cover for a song from The Fascinating Widow, 1911 (Public domain); and inside page from the December 12, 1921, program for The Demi-Virgin.

Bootleggers and Bohemians: The Defiant Nightlife of Greenwich Village During Prohibition
by Lily Gold

Enacted into law in October 1919, the Volstead Act took effect January 16, 1920, enforcing the then-newly established 18th Amendment and thereby prohibiting the manufacture and distribution of alcoholic beverages. Now known as Prohibition, this era of federally-mandated teetotalism lasted thirteen years, only to be repealed in 1933 by the ratification of the 21st Amendment, ending Prohibition.

A 1923 raid on Luigi's in Greenwich Village when officials confiscated $60,000 of liquor.
Source: Museum of the City of New York

Prohibition marked an huge shift in American culture. Seemingly overnight, bars and saloons, once integral to socialization and fraternization (at least for men), underwent a mass shutdown. The only legal way for one to purchase alcohol was limited to medicinal and religious purposes. For the first time in United States history, the tap ran completely dry.

But, of course, the 1920s fizzed, bubbled, and roared nonetheless. It was an era defined by decadence, indulgence, and organized crime. Unsurprisingly, Prohibition was considered widely unpopular by many Americans, especially as the culture became more progressive; the New York Police Commissioner Richard Enright captured public opinion in the 1923 NYPD's annual report to the mayor by stating "...the federal prohibition laws have neither the support nor the respect of the public...."

And gangsters and mobsters capitalized on alcohol's growing demand and dominated illegal trade channels, often bribing policemen and judges to turn a blind eye to their forbidden activities. Citizens relied on these bootleggers to fulfill their boozy needs and turned to illegally-run, unlicensed barrooms known as speakeasies in the absence of legal taverns and pubs. In the wake of Prohibition, speakeasies, also called blind pigs and gin joints, skyrocketed in popularity; by the late 1920s, there were some 32,000 speakeasies hidden within New York City alone.

Today we are looking at the Village's nightlife behind all the closed doors, false walls, hidden back rooms, and, more specifically, the raids that nearly killed and rebels that maintained New York's most illicit nightlife scene.

Barney Gallant

Perhaps one of New York's most beloved Prohibition protestors was Latvian immigrant Barney Gallant (1884-1968). Arriving in the States in 1903, Gallant found himself in the Village where he worked as a prominent restaurateur and even lived with playwright Eugene O'Neill. By 1919, Gallant was the manager at the esteemed Greenwich Village Inn on Sheridan Square, and adamantly opposed the federal ban on liquor. Ignoring the law, Gallant allowed his waiters to continue serving alcohol to customers, not knowing his patrons were undercover cops. Consequently, Gallant became the first New Yorker prosecuted under the Volstead Act.

Rather than learning his lesson, Gallant's short jail-time stint ignited a Robin Hood-esque passion for partying and a determined Gallant opened a series of speakeasies and clubs beneath the government's noses. In 1922, he started Club Gallant at 40 Washington Square South before moving the venue to 85 West Third Street. He went on to open the swankier, more exclusive Speako de Luxe, continuing to offer roisters space to release inhibitions and have themselves a drink (or two).
By the time Prohibition ended in 1933, Gallant was a local celebrity, with the press calling him the Mayor of Greenwich Village. Gallant continued to

Barney Gallant (standing). Photo source: Ephemeral New York

open and run restaurants and bars in the neighborhood before moving to Miami later in his life. Law-abiding citizen or not, Barry Gallant never let anyone go thirsty.

The Rainbow Inn Nightclub and the Greenwich Village Crew

Known for its eclectic streets, bars and restaurants that bleed into the streets, and bohemian residents, for decades, the East Village has sat at the epicenter of counterculture movements. From the East River to Bowery, the neighborhood was no stranger to nightlife, especially during Prohibition.

At 82 East Fourth Street, just off Second Avenue, sat the Rainbow Inn Nightclub. A distinguished "dripping wet" secret nightery, it was the subject of a mass raid in 1930 when officials seized countless bottles of liquor, vats of wine, and barrels of beer. From 1953 to 1973 the basement nightery transformed into Club 82, a prominent nightclub known for its elaborate and entertaining drag show performances. While Club 82 eclipsed the venue's speakeasy origins in terms of public impact, it never strayed far from ties to organized crime. For its twenty-year-long run, mafia Don Vito Genovese controlled the club with his wife, Anna Genovese operating as the club's boss and head hostess.

25 DRY AGENTS RAID GREENWICH VILLAGE

Eight Alleged Wet Centres Give Up Liquor, Wines, Beer and Twelve Prisoners.

NIGHT CLUB IS ON LIST

Rainbow Inn Entered on Search Warrant by McCampbell's Men—Three-Bottle Seizure in Bronx.

Such criminal activity permeated the streets during Prohibition. A 1930 census reported that there were 77 speakeasies on the Bowery. The Genovese family was a powerful force, dominating New York's organized crime ring. They controlled the Village Crew and operated out of Vito Genovese's mother's apartment at 208 Sullivan Street.

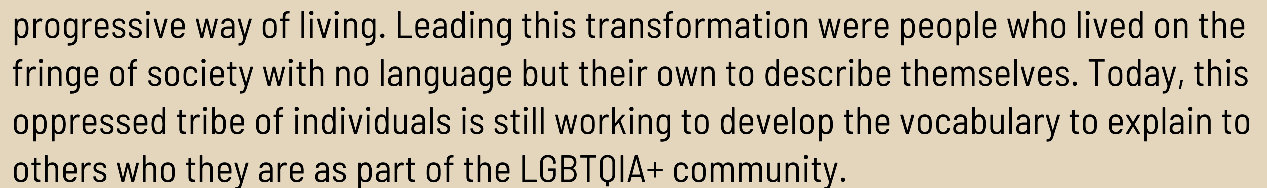
Even with the Volstead Act, partying in the Village persisted, just more covertly. Raids would happen, speakeasies would relocate, payouts would occur — the cycle continued until Prohibition's end in 1933. Figures like Barney Gallant became symbols of resistance, and underground clubs, like the Rainbow Inn and those operated by the Genovese family, further solidified Greenwich Village and the East Village as epicenters of counterculture and nightlife, even in the face of governmental crackdowns.

Misbehavin': The Quiet & Queer Rebellion of the 1920s
by Tim Yarbrough

The Volstead Act, better known as the National Prohibition Act, enforced the 18th Amendment's ban on alcohol in America on January 12, 1920. This attempt to apply governmental control to an individual's personal choices created criminals out of everyone who consumed alcohol. The change resulted in a general disregard for the law, especially by those who disagreed with the tenets of the Temperance movement. Instead of stopping the use of alcohol, it rapidly increased consumption, establishing opportunities for people to take advantage of the new black market in the production, distribution, and sale of intoxicating spirits. It proved to be a profitable enterprise, birthing organized crime and mob bosses like the infamous Al Capone. The violent gang wars to control the money flow contributed to the reversal of this law with the passage of the 21st Amendment to the US Constitution over 13 years later. The parties and merriment were supposed to end when they enforced the prohibition. Instead, it gave birth to the period now known as the "Roaring 20s". It proved to be one of the most transformational chapters in US history, changing the lives and attitudes of every member of society.

The phrase "speak softly shop," meaning a "smuggler's house," appeared in a British slang dictionary published in 1823. The similar term "speakeasy shop," denoted a place with unlicensed liquor sales, appeared in a British naval memoir written in 1844. In the United States, a newspaper article from March 21, 1889, refers to "speakeasy" as the name used in the Pittsburgh-area town of McKeesport, Pennsylvania, for "a saloon that sells without a license." Speakeasies were so-called because of the practice of speaking quietly about such a place in public, when inside, not to alert police or neighbors. A familiar American anecdote traces the term to Kate Hester, who ran an unlicensed bar in the 1880s in McKeesport.

In January of 1920, there was an explosion of these secret meeting places in every town in the country. The large urban areas had thousands upon thousands in existence, with actual numbers never known because of the secretive nature of the business. Within these hidden spaces, we saw the blending of races, classes, and people at all levels of society. These newly formed clubs brought together people from all walks of life. The marginalized people expressing their sexuality, musicians, entertainers, social elites, celebrities, politicians, working-class Blacks, and upper-class, White, cis-gendered, gay, and straight alike all rushed to be a part of this new


progressive way of living. Leading this transformation were people who lived on the fringe of society with no language but their own to describe themselves. Today, this oppressed tribe of individuals is still working to develop the vocabulary to explain to others who they are as part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a homosexual subculture, uniquely African American in substance, began to shape in New York's Harlem, the so-called "Harlem Renaissance." This period in time has long been recognized as a seminal moment in African American history. It was also a significant moment in the history of gay Americans in that Black lesbians and gay men and the interracial gay social networks they created played a key role. The literary renaissance and music of the blues and jazz in the clubs made Harlem famous in the 1920s. Female impersonator Phil Black, entertainer Frankie "half-pint" Jaxson, and singer George Hanna used elements of homosexuality in their professional acts and were still highly respected within the entertainment community.

Many bisexual and lesbian Black women, including Bessie Smith, Gladys Bentley, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Alberta Hunter, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Josephine Baker, and Ethel Waters, found their fame on the stages of Speakeasies and Rent Parties, popular during this time. However, nearly most women adopted a heterosexual public persona and kept their love affairs with women a secret, but few openly acknowledged their sexuality. Gladys Bentley was an exception, as was Ma Rainey. Rainy was a short, squat, dark skin woman with a deep, earthy voice and a warm, friendly gold-toothed smile. Though married, the flamboyant entertainer was known to take women as lovers. Her memorable song, "Prove it on Me," speaks directly to her issue of lesbianism. She admits to her preference for male attire and female companionship; yet dares the audience to prove it to her.

White lesbians and gay men were among those invading Harlem. With its sexually tolerant population and its quasi-legal nightlife, Harlem offered an oasis to White homosexuals. But, for some, a trip to Harlem was part of a more significant rebellion against the prohibition era's conservative moral and political climate.

The Speakeasies were one of the vessels for societal change in the early 20th century of America. The community they built attracted White and Black homosexuals, creating friendships between people of disparate ethnic and economic backgrounds and building alliances for progressive social change. However, with the stock market crash of 1929 and the repeal of prohibition, the pendulum began to swing back to a more conservative nature of American society.

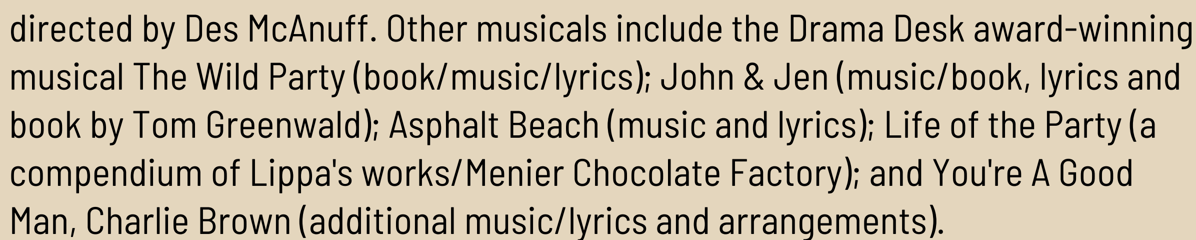
America has always progressed; two steps forward and one step back. We should look back to this time for inspiration as we continue the struggle to be visible, appreciated, contributing participants in the dream of what it means to be an American.

Andrew Lippa
from andrewlippa.com

Andrew Lippa is a composer, lyricist, singer, actor, conductor, and producer. His concert work Unbreakable had its world premiere with The San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus in June 2018 with 300 artists onstage, including himself. In May of 2018, he conducted the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in a new production of his and Brian Crawley's A Little Princess in concert at the Royal Festival Hall to a sold-out crowd of nearly 3,000 people. His hit song "Evil Like Me" appears in Disney's Descendants. Written for Kristin Chenoweth, the soundtrack hit #1 on the "Billboard 200" album chart, #1 on the iTunes and Billboard soundtrack charts and "Evil Like Me" was certified gold in 2017. He has conducted celebrated pianist Lang Lang and the Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra in the world premiere of a commissioned symphonic work for piano, soprano, tenor, children's chorus, and orchestra. I Am Harvey Milk, his epic oratorio for men's chorus, orchestra and soloists, has seen over 50 productions including Disney Hall and Lincoln Center. Lippa's musical, The Man in the Ceiling, based on Jules Feiffer's book (and co-written with Feiffer) released a world premiere studio album in May of 2019. His obsession with Netflix's Tiger King yielded two songs/videos in April, 2020 and, for a while, got his mind off the pandemic.

Current projects include songs for the original film musical A Totally Awesome 80's Christmas Musical with a screenplay by David I. Stern, produced by Alex Lebovici for Hammerstone Studios; book/music/lyrics for a stage adaptation of The Turning Point produced by Kevin McCollum; book/music/lyrics for Leap, a musical based on Lippa's I am Harvey Milk and I Am Anne Hutchinson; and collaborations with writer Adam Gopnik, writer/producer Jonathan Prince, and others.

Broadway credits include: music and lyrics for Big Fish (directed/choreographed by Susan Stroman); the Tony®-nominated music and lyrics for the Broadway musical The Addams Family directed by Jerry Zaks, as well as the music for Aaron Sorkin's Broadway play The Farnsworth Invention



directed by Des McAnuff. Other musicals include the Drama Desk award-winning musical The Wild Party (book/music/lyrics); John & Jen (music/book, lyrics and book by Tom Greenwald); Asphalt Beach (music and lyrics); Life of the Party (a compendium of Lippa's works/Menier Chocolate Factory); and You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown (additional music/lyrics and arrangements).

His songs have been sung by Renée Fleming, Vanessa Williams, Kristin Chenoweth, Idina Menzel, Nathan Lane, Brooke Shields, and Mel B, to name a few.

Awards include Tony® and Grammy® nominations; shared Emmy for Nickelodeon's The Wonder Pets; SFGMC Vanguard Award; The Drama Desk Award; The Outer Critics Circle Award. Lippa was named a Fellow of The Leeds Conservatoire in 2019. A graduate of the University of Michigan, Lippa serves as president of the board of The Dramatists Guild Foundation www.dgf.org

Glossary

PUGILIST- A professional boxer, a fighter

DANDY- A man who dresses expensively and heavily values his appearance

INDUBITABLY- Without a doubt

TIGHT- (in the context of the show,) drunk or intoxicated.

ASKANCE- to look at someone with disapproval or distrust

RENDEZVOUS- French. Meeting somewhere at an agreed-upon time. Can be professional or romantic.

YORE- A long time ago. The distant past.

JUGGERNAUGHT- (in the context of the show) a dance craze of the time.

Additional Materials
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When 'Petting Parties' Scandalized The Nation

Queer love and friendship: 1920s Fitzroy Square

Bright Young Things